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Praxis

The making of Ḥanina ben Dosa: Fan fiction in the Babylonian Talmud

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[0.1] Abstract—The Babylonian Talmud provides a series of stories about a certain Ḥanina ben Dosa, the last of the so-called men of deed according to the Mishna. This Ḥanina ben Dosa appears only sparsely in the earlier Palestinian rabbinic works, so the later, more elaborate, and more numerous stories about this character in the Babylonian Talmud seem to represent a case of fan fiction. Using the distinction between canon and fanon, as is common in fan fiction communities, I reconstruct the conventions applied by the canon (Mishna and Tosefta) to the character Ḥanina ben Dosa, as well as the expanded conventions accepted by the fannish community (or interpretive community) represented by the Babylonian Talmud. The fanon used in a story cycle will be tested against an isolated Ḥanina ben Dosa story in a different Talmudic tractate as well as against an extra-Talmudic story. The applied conventions with regard to Ḥanina ben Dosa as adopted in a *historiola* of an incantation on an Aramaic amulet bowl from Mesopotamia appear to be the same as those of the Talmud.

[0.2] Keyword—Babylonian incantation bowls

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1. A brief note on comparison

[1.1] Ralph Weber (2014a, 2014b) recently emphasized the importance of a "philosophy of comparison"—that is, an awareness of what we are doing as we are comparing. This awareness should not amount to a justification of the reasons that led to a comparison, which often result in a listing of (assumed) commonalities. Rather, Weber emphasizes, commonalities are not a requirement of a fruitful comparison, which can simply be justified in that two things sparked the comparer's interest (2014a, 166). Of importance, however, is the specification of the *tertium comparationis* (i.e., the "third of comparison," the respect in which something is compared to something else) and, especially, the "pre-comparative *tertium,*" which is in play in the selection of the *comparanda* (the things to be compared), apart from mere interest.

[1.2] It may, of course, not always be necessary to lay out one's precomparative *tertium* or *tertium comparationis.* Yet authors themselves must be aware of the existence of the latter because only in this case "some initially asserted commonality may become unwarranted in the process of comparison; whereupon some continued interest steps in as the guiding *tertium* of the comparison until some new commonality is asserted, and so on" (Weber 2014a, 166). Only such a cognitive process allows for the *comparanda* to undergo an equal transformation into *comparata* (the things that were compared). "The resulting *comparata* are still in some

important sense the same as the initial *comparanda.* In some sense, but not in another; for they are the same and they are different. Would they not be the same in any sense, but just be different, then the comparison would not have been about what it was supposed (and perhaps announced) to be about. Would they be just the same and no different, then no inquiry and no comparison would have taken place" (2014b, 928).

[1.3] This article sets out to compare fan fiction with late antique writing culture. Both *comparanda* and especially the *tertium* changed considerably within this comparison, and it may be fruitful to describe the process in more detail than usual.

2. A fallacious precomparative *tertium:* Oral cultures

[2.1] Fiction written by fans depends in one way or another on a story owned by someone, but fan fiction is itself ownerless and open access. Fans write for others and with others. It seems that without a contention for copyright "the internet is giving us back something like an oral society in which people can retell the stories that are most important to them, and, in so doing, change them" (Walker 2004 quoted in Frizzoni 2010, 63). Others go even further with that argument and claim that in the present system "where storytelling has been industrialized to the point that our shared culture is owned by others …fanfiction is what happened to folk culture: to the appropriation of fables and the retellings of local legends, to the elaborations of tall tales and drinking songs and ghost stories told round the campfire" (Coppa 2017, 7). Therefore, the phenomenon of fan fiction, as it manifests itself on the internet, seems to serve as a suitable foil of comparison to precopyright cultures in which exactly such a folk culture was still vital. This seems especially applicable to rabbinic literature, which is said to have developed orally by faithful memorization and continuous enrichment within a voluntary association, which might then be compared to the fan community.

[2.2] However, while I still think that a comparison with assumed commonalities between rabbinic scholars and fan communities may yield interesting and fertile results, an equation of oral culture with written texts seems misguided. Why? Because it seems that, both then and now, additions to and continuations of well-known stories were and are not something that happens spontaneously and before an accidental audience. An accidental audience would not understand and appreciate pastiches or changes and additions to a defined plot. If, on the other hand, the audience is made of like-minded experts, the presentation has to be prepared in advance and cautiously, and therefore in written form. The texts accepted in internet fan communities are like the late antique rabbinic texts; they do not reshape or continue other texts in a haphazard way, as may be expected from the retelling of a tall tale or an entertaining hyperbole of an adventure (note 1). Fan fiction and rabbinic literature are consciously crafted texts—the late antique ones probably even more so than the contemporary, considering the fact that writing was more laborious.

[2.3] Thus, my precomparative *tertium* changed from comparing two quasi-oral cultures to comparing two distinctly and consciously writing cultures. The standards with which the texts are crafted within the two settings became the *tertium comparationis,* the respect against which fan fiction and rabbinic texts are compared.

3. Conventions within fan fiction

[3.1] Fans of a certain plot are, in some way or another, emotionally attached to it. This respective plot, generally official and under copyright, is often referred to as *canon*—a loaded and somewhat misleading term, as I explain in another contribution to this issue of the

journal. Indeed, while the copyrighted mainstream work (calling it the original only leads to further misconceptions) may have triggered the fandom, it is the willingness of the fan community to elaborate further on the plot that dictates the rules. It is therefore the *fanon* that matters more than the canon, the former being described as "a fan-authored idea or interpretation that is so perfect, so convincing or fun that other fan-authors simply adopt it wholesale" (Coppa 2017, ix) (note 2). In fan communities, canon and fanon stand on a par, breaking down the boundaries between producers and consumers, creating prodsumers or produsers (note 3).

[3.2] While the fanon defines the interpretive conventions, other, formal conventions concern the fact that a story has to be assigned to one of the main genres of fan fiction: *gen* (general audience, not focused on romance), *het* (focusing on heterosexual erotica and romance), or *slash* (focusing on homosexual erotica and romance) (Kaplan 2006, 138) (note 4). Subgenres provide further orientation for the reader (or the archivist of the site) with regard to the content of the story. To give some classic examples:

- *H/C* (hurt and comfort): A character is injured and comforted by another.
- *Mpreg:* A man gets pregnant.
- *Deathfic:* A major character dies.
- *Curtainfic:* Domestic fic (main characters (often male slash pairing) shop for curtains, etc.).
- *Episode fic:* Rewritten canonical episode with a (preferred) different outcome.
- *Episode tag* or *missing scene:* Continuation of canonical scene providing additional information.
- *AU* (alternate universe): Canonical characters facing a new setting (which may or may not be mentioned or created in the canon).
- *Crossover:* Combines characters from two sources into a single story (which then results in an AU for one or both sides).
- *Mary Sue* (if feminine)*/Marty Stu* or *Gary Stu* (if masculine): Inserting a new person (usually an avatar of the authors themselves) into the story, who becomes its new hero. (note 5)

[3.3] The mere fact that such lists of possible topics exist points to a certain normativity and self-restriction in play: not everything goes (note 6). Such a restriction, however, can only be applied to written texts and helps to warn readers of content that might surprise them in an unpleasant way.

[3.4] Thus, fan fiction is not just fiction, but stories written in and for a specific and competent audience, shaped against each other and building upon each other (Coppa 2017, 7–12). This fact is also expressed by the excessive use of abbreviations and terms that may seem cryptic to outsiders (Busse and Hellekson 2006, 12).

[3.5] Not by convention but rather by nature, fan fiction is "speculative fiction about character rather than about the world" (Coppa 2017, 12, referencing Mary Ellen Curtin). The writers of fan fiction focus on characters, their potential and potential transformations, and their social background and class identity (13). It may be that fan fiction focuses on character because it is essentially the characters that allow for identification, admiration, or hatred and thereby generate the emotional attachment to a plot—which, in turn, creates a fan. This explains also the sensitivity with which the stories are presented on the fannish platforms by means of the previously mentioned genres.

[3.6] In what follows, I will show to what extent a distinction between a character appearing in an earlier text known to the author (i.e., canon) and the character's fanon (agreed-upon extracanonical knowledge by the fan community resulting from their shared interpretations) can serve as a tool to denote whether or not certain texts stem from the same interpretive community (Kaplan 2006, 136) (note 7).

4. Canon and fanon about Ḥanina ben Dosa

[4.1] The earlier texts known to the authors who contributed to the Babylonian Talmud (approximately sixth century CE) were the Hebrew Bible (sixth–second century BCE), the Mishna (second century CE), and the Tosefta (second–fourth century CE). The Mishna and the Tosefta are collections of (mostly) case law; the Palestinian and the Babylonian Talmuds take the form of commentaries on the Mishna to enhance the topics raised therein.

[4.2] The remainder of this discussion will be concerned with the reconstruction of the rabbinic fanon with regard to Ḥanina ben Dosa. Ḥanina ben Dosa is a character who appears in both the Mishna and the Tosefta. Because these traditions are older than those in the Babylonian Talmud, they can be considered as being canon in the sense of forming a basis for further elaborations of the character. The stories in the Mishna and the Tosefta shall therefore be analyzed first in order to deduce from them the canonical conventions concerning the character Ḥanina ben Dosa. Building upon this, we will then see how they have been adapted and enhanced in the Babylonian Talmud, and hence what the latter fanon looks like.

[4.3] This is particularly interesting because the character of Ḥanina ben Dosa appears also in an anonymous non-Talmudic text from roughly the same time and region. By comparing the features of this story to the canonical and the fannish conventions regarding Ḥanina ben Dosa, we can discuss whether it is likely that the non-Talmudic text was produced within the same interpretive community as the Talmudic stories.

5. Conventions in the canon about Ḥanina ben Dosa

[5.1] The Mishna tractate Avot 3:9/10 quotes Ḥanina ben Dosa as saying that deeds have priority over wisdom. In accordance with this statement, Ḥanina is never cited throughout rabbinic literature in connection with a halakhic issue (i.e., concerning the traditional law) but as someone who does things in a particular and effective way. In the same vein, the Mishna tractate Soṭa 9:15 (par Tosefta Soṭa 16:5) reports that with the death of Ḥanina the "men of deed" (מעשה אנשי) ceased to be. Hence, already for the canon Ḥanina is history.

[5.2] Accordingly, Mishna tractate Berakhot 5:5 relates to Ḥanina in a hearsay manner (translations mine unless otherwise indicated):

[5.3] (Hebrew) They say about him, about rabbi Ḥanina ben Dosa, that when he prayed for the sick he would say, "This one will live, and this one will die." They said to him, "Whence do you know this?" He told them, "If the prayer in my mouth feels stimulating then I know that it has been accepted (by God); if not, I know that it was rejected."

[5.4] This story is also present in the Tosefta, but there it refers to an anonymous man (Tosefta tractate Berakhot 3:3).

[5.5] Alternatively, an anecdote referring to Ḥanina in the Tosefta is recounted anonymously in the Mishna (Tosefta Berakhot 3:20/Mishna Berakhot 5:1; the story is also reported in the later Midrash Shemot Rabba 3:12). The incident is told in the same hearsay manner:

[5.6] (Hebrew) They say about him, about rabbi Ḥanina ben Dosa, that he was standing and praying. An 'Arod [unknown term, most likely a snake or a lizard; Jastrow 1903, 1114] bit him, but he did not stop (praying). His students went and found it (the 'Arod) dead in the opening of its hole. They said, "Woe to the man who is bitten by an 'Arod! (But) Woe to the 'Arod who did bite Ḥanina ben Dosa!"

[5.7] The canon therefore characterizes Ḥanina in these incidents as steadfast in prayer and experienced in praying for the sick.

[5.8] This is very little information compared with the eleven different traditions mentioning Ḥanina in the Babylonian Talmud, some of which have multiple mentions (note 8). The character "Ḥanina ben Dosa" seemingly expanded greatly between the basic information in the Mishna and the Tosefta. This is most probably due to the fact that to tag a man an *ish ha ma'aseh* (man of deed) bears a lot of potential for imagining those very deeds. The canonical conventions about Ḥanina therefore imply that he was a man of deed, and that this deed came about by prayer.

6. The Babylonian fanon about Ḥanina ben Dosa

[6.1] Although the canonical traditions let the outcome of Ḥanina's prayer be dependent on God, Ḥanina fan fiction lets his prayers always be answered positively. Thus, the stories in the Talmud depict Ḥanina praying for rain to stop and start again (bTan 24b/bYom 53b); Ḥanina praying for an ill child, who promptly recovers (bBer 34b, 2x); and Ḥanina helping a child who fell into a cistern to float by means of prayer (bYev 121b/BK50a) (note 9). Even so, it seems that the fanon does not regard prayer to be mandatory to a Ḥanina story; rather, what all the stories have in common is a miracle—an unexpected, supernatural event.

[6.2] The fanon also holds that Ḥanina is an early figure from Palestine because he is reported in the Palestinian works Mishna and Tosefta. He is therefore always somehow brought into connection with tannaitic traditions (i.e., early rabbinic traditions from Palestine in Hebrew). The Ḥanina traditions thus often take the form of a *baraita* (i.e., tannaitic material not included in the Mishna), as in bBer 34b, bBK 50a par bYev 121b and bBer 33a, or seemingly explain a *baraita* (bTan 24b-25a).

[6.3] Several stories are tagged as being a *ma'aseh,* a "deed" or "incident" (bBK 50a4/ bYev 121b2, bBer 33a2, bTan 25a). David Stern characterized the *ma'aseh* as a story with a blunt didactic purpose. Because righteous people are depicted as being protected in their everyday lives and their prayers are shown to be answered, the stories encourage their audience to live and act in a similar way (Stern 1991, 13–18).

7. The Ḥanina story cycle in the Babylonian Talmud tractate Ta'anit 24b-25a

[7.1] Most interesting for the analysis here is a story cycle consisting of seven stories in the Babylonian Talmud tractate Ta'anit and a single story in the tractate Pesaḥin. They will serve to show how these fannish conventions were applied and were examined for soundness (or, as it was called in Latin textbooks, *verisimilitas*) by others (note 10).

[7.2] The story cycle in bTan 24b-25a is part of a larger collection of stories depicting rabbis experiencing a miracle and their own or God's reaction to it. The miracles are shown to be a threat to the peace of society, the order of creation, and the integrity of the creator (note 11). The seven stories that involve Ḥanina ben Dosa are interrupted twice by comments from the compiler of the Talmud, but never by a story starring another rabbi.

[7.3] In the first story, rain distresses the strolling Ḥanina. He prays and the rain stops until he is back home again. Although this is an entertaining story, it was found to be unsound. In internet fan fiction, it is the "so-called *beta readers* who critique, read, and help revise on various levels, including spelling and grammar, style and structure, and canonicity and remaining in character" (Busse and Hellekson 2006, 6). In the Talmud, it is the compiler who takes care of inserting objections; he sometimes pulls these as excerpts from other contexts, but sometimes they are simply his own remarks, which he attributes to a fitting rabbi. In the case of this Ḥanina story, a comment attributed to Rav Yosef objects that the story is not aligned with the fact that the high priest used to pray on the feast of Yom Kippur that the prayers of travelers should not be heard (note 12). On that basis, the story's soundness is restored with the explanation that Ḥanina must be more important in God's eyes than is the high priest. Apart from this necessary rectification of the story, the positing of the high priest as a contemporary to Ḥanina archaizes the story in Aramaic, which otherwise lacks any sign of being of tannaitic origin.

[7.4] A statement attributed to Rav Yehuda (in the name of Rav) then reinforces the claim of Ḥanina's importance before God by adding that the whole world is sustained for the sake of Ḥanina, whom God calls here "my son." Despite his importance in God's eyes, however, a *qav* of carobs is said to be enough for Ḥanina from Sabbath eve to Sabbath eve (note 13). Thus, it is his intimate relationship with God ("my son") that gives Ḥanina priority over the high priest.

[7.5] As the story cycle progresses, it is this intimacy that lets Ḥanina experience miracles whether he is praying or not. The miracles apparently happen to him because he is Ḥanina ben Dosa—someone who enjoys a special favoritism by God because of his previous history of pious deeds, which need not be repeated every time. This fannish convention will be confirmed by the stories that follow. The fact that Ḥanina's pious deeds lie in the past enables the storytellers to let his behavior appear less pious now, as in the story with the rain miracle where Ḥanina stopped the necessary rain.

[7.6] The next six stories would probably be labeled curtainfic (see the earlier definition) in contemporary popular fan fiction forums. They show the family of Ḥanina involved in daily activities. By so doing, they fulfill the curiosity of fans who already may have wondered what it must be like to be married to someone like Ḥanina or to have a father like him. Thus, the next story introduces a completely new figure into the plot, namely Ḥanina's wife. However, as Kristina Busse (2017, 116) has pointed out, it depends greatly on the interpretive community whether "out-of-characterness" or the insertion of avatars is approved of and to what extent (note 14). Within the interpretive community in and for which the subsequent Ḥanina stories were written, it would seem the insertion of avatars was only allowed in a very restricted way.

[7.7] Thus, Ḥanina's wife remains nameless; she is introduced casually as "she from his house," and even her neighbor calls her "Madam so-and-so" (note 15). This second story in the cycle is not introduced as a *baraita* but ends with a commentary formulated like a *baraita* and attributed to a Tanna (a Palestinian teacher of the first rabbinic generations). The purpose

of this *baraita* is to justify the addition of Ḥanina's wife as a new character by demonstrating that she already had been part of the storyline in tannaitic times.

[7.8] (Aramaic) She from his house used to heat the oven every Shabbat eve in order to produce much smoke because of the shame. She had a neighbor woman [who] said, Since I know that they have nothing [I will go and see] what is all this [smoke]. She went and knocked on the door, and she [Ḥanina's wife] was ashamed and entered the inner room. A miracle was performed for her, and she saw the oven full of bread and the trough full of dough. She [the neighbor] said to her [Ḥanina's wife], Madam So-and-so, Madam So-and-so, bring the ladle as your bread is going to get burnt. She said to her, That is why I entered.

[7.9] (Hebrew) A Tannaitic tradition [says]: She even went to bring the ladle because she was used to miracles (bTan 25a). (trans. follows Hasan-Rokem [2009, 42] with modifications)

[7.10] In the same manner—by adding a seemingly older tannaitic tradition at the end that apparently refers to the narrated incident—the next (third) story in this cycle, which involves again Ḥanina's wife, is authorized, as is the fourth narrative which introduces Ḥanina's daughter. The fifth story, on the other hand, only features Ḥanina, so there is no need for such an authorization. Consequently, this is also the case in the Talmud. The story depicts Ḥanina in a conflict with someone (only referred to by using a passive voice construction: Ḥanina was told), which represents another daily experience shared by the members of the interpretive community. The neighbor complained that Ḥanina's goats would damage his fields. In reply to this, Ḥanina says that if that were so, his goats should be eaten by bears; if not, they should each carry a bear in their horns when they came back in the evening. And this is what happened: "In the evening, they each carried a bear in their horns."

[7.11] The sixth story is about Ḥanina meeting a woman who wants to build a house, but her beams are too short. When she comes before him, he asks her about her name. In the context of his wife and daughter having gone unnamed in the previous stories, this is a rather remarkable feature. By asking this question, the story crosses the border into the fan fiction subgenre of real person fiction (RPF), a popular fan fiction subgenre highly disputed by the community for moral and legal reasons. It seems that this move toward RPF (by revealing a character's true name) also called for special measures in the Talmud: in addition to a *baraita*—which, again, is used to conclude a story introducing new characters—the eyewitness testimony of Pelimo, a tannaitic rabbi, is added.

[7.12] (Aramaic) He had this woman neighbor who built her house, and the beams were not long enough. She came before him and told him, "I built a house, and the beams were not long enough." He asked her, "What is your name?" She answered, "Aiku." He said, "Aiku, may your beams be long enough!"

[7.13] (Hebrew) A tannaitic tradition: They were so long that they extended an *ama*-measure of length from here and an *ama*-measure from there. And some say, He made them branches.

[7.14] (Hebrew) They told [in a *baraita*]: Pelimo says, I saw that house and its beams were protruding an *ama*-measure here and an *ama*-measure there. And they told me, That is the house which Rabbi Ḥanina ben Dosa covered with his prayer. (note 16)

[7.15] This extra claim of truth frees the story from the reproach of being slanderous. The woman really was too poor to afford beams that were long enough, and after Ḥanina performed a miracle, they really stood out on each side of the house.

[7.16] After this story the Talmud returns to Ḥanina's goats. A beta reader objects, "How could Ḥanina ben Dosa possess goats when he was poor?" And further the sages said, "They do not raise small cattle in the land of Israel" (bTan 25a). This objection refers to the convention stated previously in this story cycle: Ḥanina is poor. Moreover, according to the canon he is from Palestine, so the character of Ḥanina ben Dosa needs to be subjected to the rules that apply to Palestine. This objection again demonstrates the strict control with regard to the conventions, which the story about Ḥanina's goats failed to meet (note 17).

[7.17] Interestingly, the manuscripts stop the list of Ḥanina ben Dosa stories here. The later prints (Pessaro, Venezia, Vilna) add an additional story to rehabilitate the last story, which had failed to meet the approval of the members of the interpretive community:

[7.18] (Hebrew) Rabbi Pinḥas said: An incident (מעשה): A man passed the door of his [Rabbi Ḥanina's] house and left there some chicken, and Rabbi Ḥanina ben Dosa's wife (אשתו) found them, and he told her, Do not eat from their eggs. And the eggs multiplied and the chicken bothered them so they sold them and bought goats with that money. Once that same man who had lost the chicken passed by and told his companion, "Here I left my chicken." Rabbi Ḥanina heard him, and told him, "Can you point out a distinguishing sign for them?" He said, "Yes." He gave him the sign and he took the goats. Those were the very goats that brought back bears on their horns. (trans. Hasan-Rokem [2009, 51], with modifications)

[7.19] This story stands out from the other six in that it is in Hebrew, attributed to the mouth of a certain (Palestinian) rabbi (Rabbi Pinḥas), and introduced as a *ma'aśeh.* Intentionally the author stresses the story's relationship with the canon. Even more than that, the story becomes indistinguishable from canonical material. Yet apart from the fact that the story is not present in any of the existing manuscripts, it also betrays its young age by referring back to the story with the goats, which is definitely a work of the postcanonical interpretive community and not to a *baraita.*

[7.20] This story cycle gives a live impression of how conventions were proposed and critically reviewed by others. It also shows that special attention was paid to the introduction of new characters into the canonical storyline and to the naming of real people.

[7.21] In summation, the Babylonian fanon states the following:

- Stories about Ḥanina must take place in a tannaitic setting.
- Ḥanina is from Palestine.
- The stories do not have to have the shape of a *ma'aseh* (an exemplary tale of a righteous person), but a supernatural interference is expected.
- His prayers are always answered, but they are not mandatory to the plot.
- He has an intimate relationship with God ("son"), and miracles result from this heavenly favoritism (rather than from prayer).
- Ḥanina is poor.

[7.22] Also, in the creation of the stories, special attention is paid to the introduction of new people to the plot, which is generally limited to the denotation of their role (e.g., wife, daughter). In one case, where a coprotagonist is introduced with her proper name (thereby turning it into a form of real person fiction), an eyewitness testimony is added.

8. Application of the fanon to other Ḥanina stories

[8.1] It may be interesting to compare the fanon established along the story cycle in the Babylonian Talmud's tractate Ta'anit 25a to other Ḥanina ben Dosa stories in the Talmud to see whether they adhere to the same fanon and may therefore be considered to be the product of the same interpretive community. A story from tractate Pesaḥim 112b serves here as a further test case. This story has, as a somewhat extraordinary matter of fact, an extra-Talmudic parallel in an amuletic bowl. The latter offers yet another possibility for testing the fanon, as we will discuss.

[8.2] The Ḥanina story in bPes 112b is embedded in a long list of exemplified situations and conditions to beware of in order to avoid the harmful attack of demons. Contrary to the Ḥanina stories discussed earlier, the story in tractate Pesaḥim is not concluded with a *baraita* (a Hebrew and therefore apparently early rabbinic tannaitic tradition) but is prefaced with one.

[8.3] (Hebrew) For it was taught (דתניא): A single person should not go out at night, not in the night of the fourth day or the night of the Sabbath. Because Agrat bat Maḥlat and eighteen myriads of angels of destruction (חבלה מלאכי) go out (in these nights) and each and every one has a permission to destroy in his own right (עצמו בפני). (bPes 112b)

[8.4] This tradition triggers the question, Why do the demoness Agrat bat Maḥlat and her destructive entourage only swarm out on two nights of the week? The answer follows subsequently in the shape of a story, which locates this fact in the demoness's encounter with Ḥanina ben Dosa.

[8.5] (Aramaic) Originally it was common for them (to swarm out) daily. One time she (Agrat bat Maḥlat) met Ḥanina ben Dosa and said to him, "If it had not been publicly announced in heaven: 'Beware of Rabbi Ḥanina ben Dosa, my son!'—your blood would be valued in my place (only) in small coins." He said to her, "If I am so important in heaven, I decree upon you that you shall never cross the world again." She said to him, "Leave a little room for me!" He left for her Wednesday night and Friday night. (trans. per New York Columbia [X 893 T14a] dating to 1546–1548)

[8.6] It seems that the previously derived fannish conventions have been applied and met in this story. Because the story explains a (seemingly) tannaitic tradition, Ḥanina is again removed to a distant past in Palestine. The story is not tagged as an incident (*ma'aseh*), but meeting a demoness was also considered a supernatural event in late antiquity, especially if the encounter did not result in a mere attack from the demon but in a dialogue. Because the prayer was no longer considered mandatory by the fanon (contrary to the canon), it is also absent from this story. Instead, the special relationship that Ḥanina entertains with God is again placed at the fore, as required by the fanon. And again, it is this apparent position of (previously earned) preference that enables Ḥanina to ban the demoness, not a righteous deed performed or a prayer uttered on the spot.

[8.7] If there are no parallels anywhere else in earlier rabbinic literature, the simple fact that a *baraita* is introduced as such, and in Hebrew, cannot be taken as a proof of authenticity. Yet if this *baraita* is indeed taken as earlier material upon which someone created an explanatory story, it becomes more understandable why the choice of character fell on Ḥanina: he was the only early figure known to be from Palestine who enjoyed enough favor with God to stop a demoness from wandering the Earth.

[8.8] The story of the demoness seems to have originated within the same interpretive community as the others. Once again a new character is introduced, but without precision for

her role, which is rather significant. But her personal name (Agrat bat Maḥlat) is provided. No special attempt is made to inform readers or listeners about who she is, or to protect her privacy, or to add an eyewitness testimony to protect the story from the suspicion of being a tall tale. In fact, how is it known that she is a demoness? This is for one part obvious from the context, which is concerned with different types of demons and their behavior. Still, from the nonchalant way in which Agrat bat Maḥlat is brought into the story, and from the fact that the *baraita* that reveals her name may stem from a different literary context, it seems that this story is a crossover featuring two already known characters, Agrat bat Maḥlat and Ḥanina ben Dosa.

[8.9] However, although pairing these characters in a story answers the question triggered by the *baraita,* it is apparently not fit to solve the problem for good: Ḥanina ben Dosa's character is too soft, and he leaves enough leeway for the demons to harm people on Wednesday and Friday nights. But there is another character who seems more fit to take care of the demoness for good: Abaye, a Babylonian teacher and a prominent figure in the Talmud:

[8.10] (Aramaic) And again on another day she met Abaye. She said to him [me], "If it were not publicly announced in heaven: 'Beware of Naḥmani and his Tora!' I would endanger you!" He said to her, "If I am so important in heaven, I decree upon you that you shall never cross the world again." (note 18)

[8.11] This exchange between the Palestinian Ḥanina ben Dosa and the (local) Babylonian teacher Abaye brings to mind what is now called a Mary Sue/Marty Stu story in fan fiction. A Mary Sue—or masculine Marty Stu—character is introduced into the story to become its new hero. This is exactly what happened here: Abaye saved the day, and people can now safely stroll around at night whenever they want to. Quite often, this Mary Sue/Marty Stu character is an avatar of the author themselves (Busse and Hellekson 2006, 11). Although it seems unlikely Abaye wrote this story himself, the identification of students with their teachers (and their teachers' teachers) was very high, as the reference to Naḥmani shows: Abaye was a student of Rabbah bar Naḥmani (Stemberger 2011, 110). Similarly, the copyist of the Munich 95 manuscript seems to have self-identified so much with Abaye that he wrote "me" instead of "him." Yet there is one obvious aspect that differs greatly from a genuine Mary Sue/Marty Stu fan fiction plot: the canonical hero, Ḥanina ben Dosa, has been eliminated from the storyline. He was not saved by a new hero but replaced. It seems that when it comes to heroes from Palestine, the alliances of the Babylonian storywriters are clear.

[8.12] Yet not only the preference for a certain character seems to be at issue here but also the pedagogical and maybe even theological message of the Ḥanina stories. The additional story featuring Abaye teaches that to have the wits to conquer a demon for good does not require being a son of God; rather, it takes the right Tora—the right teaching (note 19).

9. Ḥanina ben Dosa in an Aramaic Bowl Incantation

[9.1] The Aramaic Bowl Incantations from Mesopotamia date from the fifth to the eighth centuries CE (note 20). They were used in the same way as amulets—to protect, heal, or curse—but they were hidden in a wall, under the threshold, or in a cemetery, and often placed upside down (Morony 2003, 95; Frankfurter 2015). The pottery used was of genuine everyday make (Hunter 1996, 222).

[9.2] The ten bowls from the Schøyen collection that contain the name of Ḥanina ben Dosa were apparently all written by the same hand for two related women (Shaked, Ford, and

Bhayro 2013, 54). Thus, the sample does not attest to a whole Ḥanina interpretive community but rather to the interpretation of one scribe. The *historiola* is used like a template over the ten bowls with adaptations made only for the names (and nicknames) of the clients. The respective incantation runs as follows:

[9.3] (Aramaic) I adjure you, and I beswear you, you evil spirit, who met Rabbi Ḥanina ben Dosa, and Rabbi Ḥanina ben Dosa said to her, to the evil spirit who met him in this very hour, the verse that is written: "You make darkness and it is night, wherein all the animals of the forest creep" [Psalm 104:20]. And again, I adjure and again I beswear you, you, evil spirit, that you should not go and not become to PN daughter of PN, who is called "Nickname," neither a companion of the night nor a companion of the day. (note 21)

[9.4] Looking for the conventions established in the interpretive community represented by the Babylonian Talmud, we find that Ḥanina ben Dosa bears the title "rabbi" in the *historiola,* as sages from Palestine do (rather than "rav," which is the Babylonian/Aramaic version of this title). Furthermore, here Ḥanina cites a biblical verse and is thereby speaking Hebrew, not Aramaic. Neither the incident described here nor the one in the Talmud are classified as *ma'aseh;* rather, they both refer to a specific time (Talmud: *one time;* the bowls: *in this very hour*).

[9.5] The demoness Agrat bat Maḥlat, who is seemingly also from Palestine, judging from the way she is introduced in the Babylonian Talmud (namely, in a *baraita*), is not mentioned by name—just as she is not mentioned in the Talmudic story, in fact. The reference here is simply to an evil spirit.

[9.6] There is a further parallel to the Talmudic story: Ḥanina fails again in his attempt to ban the evil spirit for good. Citing Psalm 104:20, he confines the harmful work of the spirit to the night. This is, of course, not the holistic healing that the suffering patient wishes for. Here, the decisive "I" of the bowl's writer chimes in and adjusts this mishap by commanding that the spirit should not accompany the patient by night or by day. The conjurer does here what Abaye did in the Talmudic story: he bans the demon for good, not only partially.

[9.7] The writer of the bowl observes so many of the conventions of the fanon of the Talmudic interpretive community that it is almost impossible to assume that they had no connection with each other. The character "Ḥanina ben Dosa" is used in both versions for the same purpose: to start a good deed, which someone from Babylonia had to finish.

10. Conclusion

[10.1] This discussion has concerned itself with an investigation of the stories about Ḥanina ben Dosa in the Babylonian Talmud under the premise that they are to a certain extent comparable to internet fan fiction. The merit of this sort of examination lies mostly in the distinction between canon and fanon. The canon, as referring to an inspiring earlier source, can in the case of the Talmud be established in the Mishna, which it addresses in the form of a commentary. The reconstruction of the fannish conventions (fanon) with regard to the character requires, of course, a representative database. The eight stories analyzed here point to careful beta reading by members of the interpretive community.

[10.2] A comparison with a Ḥanina ben Dosa character found in an extra-Talmudic story has shown that most of the fanon has been maintained. Thus, the sifting out of the fanon (or simply the conventions of an interpretive community with regard to a certain character) can

help to decide whether certain stories stem from the same community. Moreover, they may point to possible beta readers or even later additions.

11. Notes

1. Not even in the time before the transition of fandom to the internet in the early 1990s, when fandom was still a "face-to-face proposition" (Busse and Hellekson 2006, 13) does it seem that fan stories were an oral matter: "Fan clubs formed, and fans *wrote* newsletters, zines and APAs ("amateur press association": add-on circuit newsletters) and got together at conventions" (emphasis mine).

2. A fan's personal, idiosyncratic interpretation, on the other hand, is called the *headcanon* (https://fanlore.org/wiki/Headcanon).

3. Jenkins adds, "Through fanfiction writing, and, specifically, the advent of the fanon, the aura of a canon author such as Austen is usurped and the shadow from which the fanfic writer rises out of is subsequently cast over the original author and text" (2015, 371).

4. These three genres function as organizing principles of fan fiction websites. However, slash is often housed in separate archives (Busse and Hellekson 2006, 10).

5. For more examples, see Busse and Hellekson (2006, 10–11). However, as they specify, there exist also "many fandom-specific categories." For the hurt and comfort genre, a writer of fan fiction confesses, "A word about Hurt/Comfort. I love it. I love it for all the wrong reasons. I don't only use it to make the stoic types more vulnerable; I adore taking the most open character (who is usually my favorite) and trashing him until he is a devastated, whimpering wreck. I can get into trashing the stoic one, too, but he's usually my second helping" (Renae 2000).

6. Indeed, some writers exhibit rather conservative and clear ideas about the guidelines that should be followed within a specific subgenre. Thus, Lucy Gillam (2001) posted the "ten commandments of crossovers" as "1. Thou shalt not cross sources just because it would be 'neat'; 2. Thou shalt know and represent both thy sources equally; 3. Thou shalt avoid the reciting of mighty deeds; 4. Thou shalt not egregiously mix thy genres [talking of the genres of the sources]; 5. Thou shalt not mix contradicting universes; 6. Thou shalt not randomly mix and match pairs; 7. Thou shalt not assume everyone is gay; 8. Thou shalt not base thy crossover on trivial coincidences; 9. Thou shalt mingle thy mythologies sparingly; 10. Thou shalt leave long-lost relatives lost."

7. For the negotiation processes over community conventions, see Busse (2017, 113–17).

8. See bBM 101a; bBQ 50a; bBer 33a.61b; bḤag 14a; bYev 121b; bYom 53b; bSoṭ 49a; bPes 112b; b Shab 112b; bTaan 24b. For charts of all of the Ḥanina mentions throughout rabbinic literature, see Becker (2002, 343–44).

9. A thirteenth-century manuscript (Ms. Vatican ebr. 216ff. 4–6cf., https://digi.vatlib.it/mss/detail/Vat.ebr.216) renders Ḥanina's prayer effective, which is otherwise not stated in the Talmud (cf. the edition and Italian edition of this *Pišr'a de R. Ḥanina ben Dos'a;* Tocci [1986]).

10. For the preeminence of verisimilitude over truth in late antique stories and speeches, see Webb (2009, 117–18). On avoiding writing OOC (out of character) fiction, see hlwar (2015).

11. Thus, Julia Watts Belser has recently approached these stories—and this story cycle in particular—"ecocritically," a literary method that takes the physical environment of the texts into consideration (2015, 188–95).

12. This whole passage has a parallel in Yom 53b.

13. This statement is also present in bBer 17b and bHul 86a.

14. Compare with Busse (2017, 116–17). Those who succeed in their communities in such a way are characterized by Busse (116) as the "most ingenuous readers—the most aggressively discontent ones."

15. פלניתא פלניתא!

16. Regarding the name "Aiku," Hasan-Rokem (2009) draws attention to its phonological closeness to the Greek οικος, "house" (50n99). More interesting seems the variant reading *Aibu,* as it appears in some manuscripts, which refers to an owl bird (50). In light of the people who had seen additional "branches"—which would better fit a nest than a house—and the story with the goats, the story with Ḥanina's obedient donkey (bShab 112b and ARN.A, chapter 8), and the hagiographical nature of this story cycle (Hasan-Rokem 2009, 52), it would just seem appropriate to let him understand the speech of a bird.

17. What I call here "fannish conventions" or "fanon" with an eye to fan fiction, Galit Hasan-Rokem (2009) calls "meta-folkloric awareness" with regard to folklore.

18. Translation according to Ms Munich 95, dating from 1342, with the noted changes. Every Mss except for Munich 95 writes "him"; Munich 95, on the other hand, writes, "she said to *me,*" which may simply be an omission of the final *he.* If the first person singular were chosen on purpose, then it should later also read "*I* said to her." This cannot be verified because Munich 95 tends to abbreviate the personal endings of the verbs, as was the case here. Also, regarding "'Beware of Naḥmani and his Tora!'," Naḥmani was Abaye's teacher. The translation at this point follows Ms Vatican 109. The reasons for why Abaye should be spared vary in the Mss, from no reason given (Munich 6) to "my son" (Munich 95; Vatican 125) or "Naḥmani my son" (NY JTS 1608 [ENA 850]).

19. Many other stories, particularly in the Babylonian Talmud, stress the importance of study (Rubenstein 2003, 16–79).

20. Morony (2003, 83) notes about the practice that it "seems to have begun and ended rather abruptly."

21. Translation follows Shaked, Ford, and Bhayro (2013). The *historiola* is present in bowls JBA 1–JBA 10 (Shaked, Ford, and Bhayro 2013, 56–85). For the Talmudic interpretation of Ps 104,20 with a rather similar story, see bBM 83b/84a. Note that "in this very hour" (שעתא בההיא) was translated as "at that time."

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